THE
MEADOWLARK
A newsletter for those involved with Wisconsin's Glacial Habitat Restoration Area
Volume 1, Issue 2 Winter 2000-01

DUCK STUDY UNDERWAY

THE WISCONSIN PRIVATE LANDS DUCK STUDY

By Ron Gatti
WDNR Biologist, Monona

The majority of Wisconsin's ducks breed on private lands, yet we know little about their productivity. Past research on ducks in Wisconsin has taken place on public wildlife areas where wetlands and grasslands are the main landcover types. On private lands, ducks are faced with different challenges of making a living within the farm landscape. Waterfowl managers have worked with private landowners to restore scattered parcels of wetlands and grasslands for nesting. However, we do not know how well our efforts are working.

A new study began this spring to determine how well ducks are doing on the rural, agricultural lands of southern Wisconsin, and to look for factors that are related to their success. Both study areas are within the Glacial Habitat Restoration Area, one located in Columbia County, near Fall River, and the other in Dodge County, north of Beaver Dam. Mallard hens were captured in live-hen decoy traps set in wetlands during March-April, before nesting. In these traps, live, game farm mallard hens were used as bait

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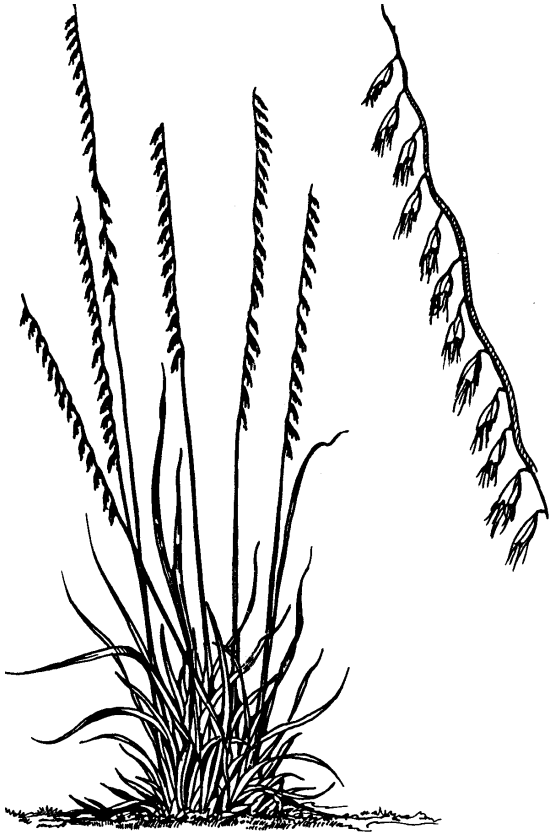

SIDE OATS GRAMA

Bouteloua curtipendula

Sideoats is a native, perennial prairie grass that prefers dry areas and grows 2-3 feet tall. It is identified by its unique flowers that grow in 2 rows along one side of the stem. The leaves are up to 12" long, very narrow, with long pointed tips.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Wisconsin's Managed Forest Law

By Tom Vanden Elzen
WDNR Forester, Oshkosh

Annual property taxes on forest land can be costly. In the past some landowners felt they were forced to cut timber prematurely in order to pay expenses. Such management harms the long-term health and value of the forest. In 1985 the legislature created the Managed Forest Law (MFL) program to encourage landowners to grow future commercial crops through sound forestry practices while recognizing individual property owners' objectives and society's needs for compatible recreational activities, forest aesthetics, wildlife habitat, erosion control, and protection of endangered resources. Some of the important features of the Managed Forest Law are:

1. The wooded parcel must be ten acres in size.
2. Landowner must follow a written management plan approved by the DNR forester.
3. At least 80 percent of the land enrolled must be productive forest land. 20 percent can be marsh, idle farmland, fields, rock out crops, and other non-wooded areas.
4. The land may be enrolled for a 25 or 50 year period, requiring a long-term commitment but also providing long-term protection from escalating property taxes.
5. The owner can elect to close up to 80 acres per municipality to public access. Otherwise enrolled land is open to hunting, fishing, cross-country skiing, hiking, and sight seeing.
6. Complete "legal descriptions" (forty acre quarter-quarter sections, government lots or fractional lots) and entire MFL entries can be transferred to new owners without problems.
7. Residences or commercial buildings are not allowed. Simple vacation cabins, hunting shacks, and utility buildings, within limits, are allowed.
8. An annual tax of $1.74 per acre is paid on closed lands. These MFL taxes are adjusted every five years for inflation.

The application deadline is January 31st for the property to be entered starting the following January 1st. For more information contact Tom Vanden Elzen at 920-424-3056.❖

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GHRA Online: http://www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/land/wildlife/HUNT/hra.htm

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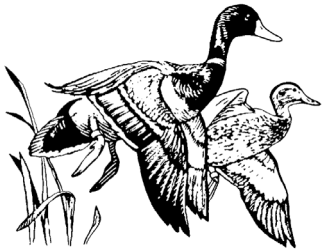
to lure wild mallard hens and their drakes into the trap. Once captured, radio transmitters were attached to the wild hens so that their movements could be followed throughout the entire breeding season. The radio transmitters were surgically implanted under the skin on the back and the hens were released.

The answers to these questions will help wildlife biologists better restore, protect, and manage habitat for wild ducks.

From this study we hope to answer the following questions:

1)What wetland types do ducks feed in during the breeding season? Ducks get the food resources for egg production from wetlands. Many wetlands have been drained and others have been altered. We want to know which of the remaining wetland types are preferred and needed by breeding hens.

2) What landcover types do ducks prefer to nest in? Ducks typically nest in grassland fields, but what about when grasslands are not available? Other possibilities for nesting are in grasslands along roadsides, wetlands, hayfields, croplands, and woodlands. Mallards are known to nest in all of these cover types in other areas, but what is preferred?



3) What is the survival of duck nests in different cover types? Hens may be attracted to nest in some cover types, but they may not be able to hatch their nests there. Predators such as raccoons, skunks, and foxes use roadsides and woodlands and predate nests that they find.

4) What wetland types do hens take their broods to? Ducks use different wetlands during brood rearing than during nesting. Ducklings need the cover of emergent vegetation (like cattails and bulrushes) to protect them from predators and provide abundant foods for their rapid growth. They may have to move long distances to find these wetlands.

5) What is the survival of ducklings from the hatch to flight stage? Are there some wetlands where ducklings survive better than others? We need to restore and protect these important wetland types in our management.

6) Lastly, what is the survival of hens during the nesting season? This is important because the production of ducklings each year has to be more than the annual mortality of adult hens for a duck population to grow in numbers. The nesting season is a dangerous time for hens, which risk their lives to sit for prolonged periods on nests and later in wetlands with their broods.

The answers to these questions will help wildlife biologists better restore, protect, and manage habitat for wild ducks.❖

Waterfowl on the Web

http://www.ducks.org/

http://www.npwrc.usgs.gov/

http://www.ducks.ca/iwwr/

http://www.fws.gov/

http://www.deltawaterfowl.org

What are WPA's?

By the United States Fish and Wildlife Service

Located at: **http://www.fws.gov/**

Line art by: *Robert Savannah, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service*

Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs) are the Prairie Jewels of the National Wildlife Refuge System. WPAs preserve wetlands and grasslands critical to waterfowl and other wildlife. These public lands, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, were included in the National Wildlife Refuge System in 1966 through the National Wildlife Refuge Administration Act.

The Duck Stamp Act, passed in 1934, was amended by Congress in 1958 to authorize acquisition of wetlands as WPAs. Thus began one of the most aggressive acquisition campaigns in history; a race against drainage tile and ditches.

Nearly 95 percent of WPAs are located in the prairie pothole areas of North and South Dakota, Minnesota, and Montana. North Dakota alone has 39 percent of the Nation's WPAs. Other key states are Michigan, Nebraska, Wisconsin, and Iowa. Idaho and Maine each have one WPA.

There are over 26,000 WPAs. They average 223 acres in size. The smallest is .9 acres (Medicine Lake WPA, North Dakota) and the largest is 3,733 acres (Kingsbury Lake WPA, Montana).

The first WPA purchased with Duck Stamp funds was the McCarlson WPA in Day County, South Dakota on January 19, 1959. Some WPAs have been donated as gifts, while a few have been reserved from public domain lands.

Wetland Management Districts (WMDs) were created in 1962 as the acquisition program accelerated due to a loan from Congress against future Duck Stamp sales. WPAs are managed by WMD staffs of 2-12 people: wildlife managers, biologists, technicians, maintenance workers, and administrative specialists.
WMD staff also manage wetland easements; perpetual contracts with willing private landowners that protect their wetlands from draining and filling with soil. To date, nearly 25,000 easements have been acquired, covering 1.6 million acres. In recent years, grassland easements have been purchased to provide permanent grassland cover around wetlands to meet the needs of upland nesting waterfowl and other wildlife.

Prairie wetlands, or "potholes," are the lifeline for fish and wildlife of the entire prairie landscape from the Rockies to Wisconsin. If wetlands in this vast Prairie Pothole Region were not saved from drainage, hundreds of species of migratory birds would literally have gone down the drain.

Although WPAs and National Wildlife Refuges account for less than 2 percent of the landscape in the Prairie Pothole Region states, they are responsible for producing nearly 23 percent of the area's waterfowl. Just as important, staff at WMDs work extensively with private landowners through voluntary partnerships that enhance private lands for waterfowl and other wildlife. The Rainwater Basin WMD in Nebraska is one of the most important stopover areas for waterfowl in North America. Approximately 2-3 million geese and 7-9 million ducks use the area for a few weeks between February and April each year as they wing their way to the breeding grounds.

WPAs protect a large portion of the remaining tallgrass prairie found in the Midwest. Helikson WPA in northwest Minnesota contains 1,373 acres of virgin prairie with grasses over 6 feet tall. The Coteau Prairie WPA in northwest North Dakota is believed to contain the largest tract of mixed grass prairie on any WPA -- 2,754 acres. Beaver Lake WPA in North Dakota harbors the largest Franklin's gull colony of any WPA. In recent years, 250 nests of the black-headed gulls have been counted. Bobolinks, striking cream- and-black colored grassland birds, rely on the grasslands found on WPAs. The population of these robin-sized birds, which winter in Argentina, would likely crash without WPAs.

Several threatened or endangered species, especially prairie plants such as the western prairie fringed orchid,

Continued on page 5

WPA's *continued from page 4*

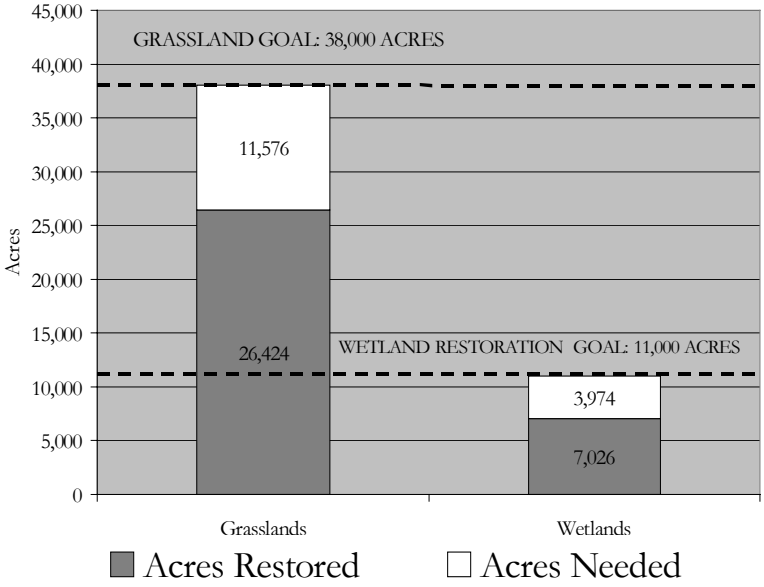
rely heavily on WPA habitat for survival. The Fuller WPA in northwestern North Dakota was purchased to protect nesting threatened piping plovers and for waterfowl production. Other rare or unique species recorded on WPAs in the West include grizzly bears, mountain lions, bobcats, blue grouse, and wolverines.

By regulation WPAs are open to hunting, fishing, and trapping in accordance with State laws. Other important wildlife-dependent uses allowed include wildlife observation, photography, and environmental education.
For more information visit the FWS web site link above.❖

GHRA Goal Watch

Acres Purchased:	**7,170.36**
Acres Eased:	**4,724.14**
Total:	**11,864.5**

Habitat Restoration Accomplishments



These accomplishments reflect the combined work of various agencies and organizations within the GHRA such as the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, The Natural Resources Conservation Service, The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, The North American Waterfowl Conservation Grant, and many others.

GHRA Species Profile

By Brenda Hill
WDNR Biologist, Horicon

Scientifically named *Phasianus colchicus,* the ring–necked pheasant was named for the thin white ring around the male's neck. This highly sought after upland bird is one of the three focus species that the GHRA program manages for (the other two are grassland songbirds and waterfowl).

The ring-necked pheasant is a year round resident of Wisconsin found in areas of grasslands, cultivated fields, marshes, and the forest edge. These places provide a diet rich in insects, land and aquatic invertebrates, seeds and grains.

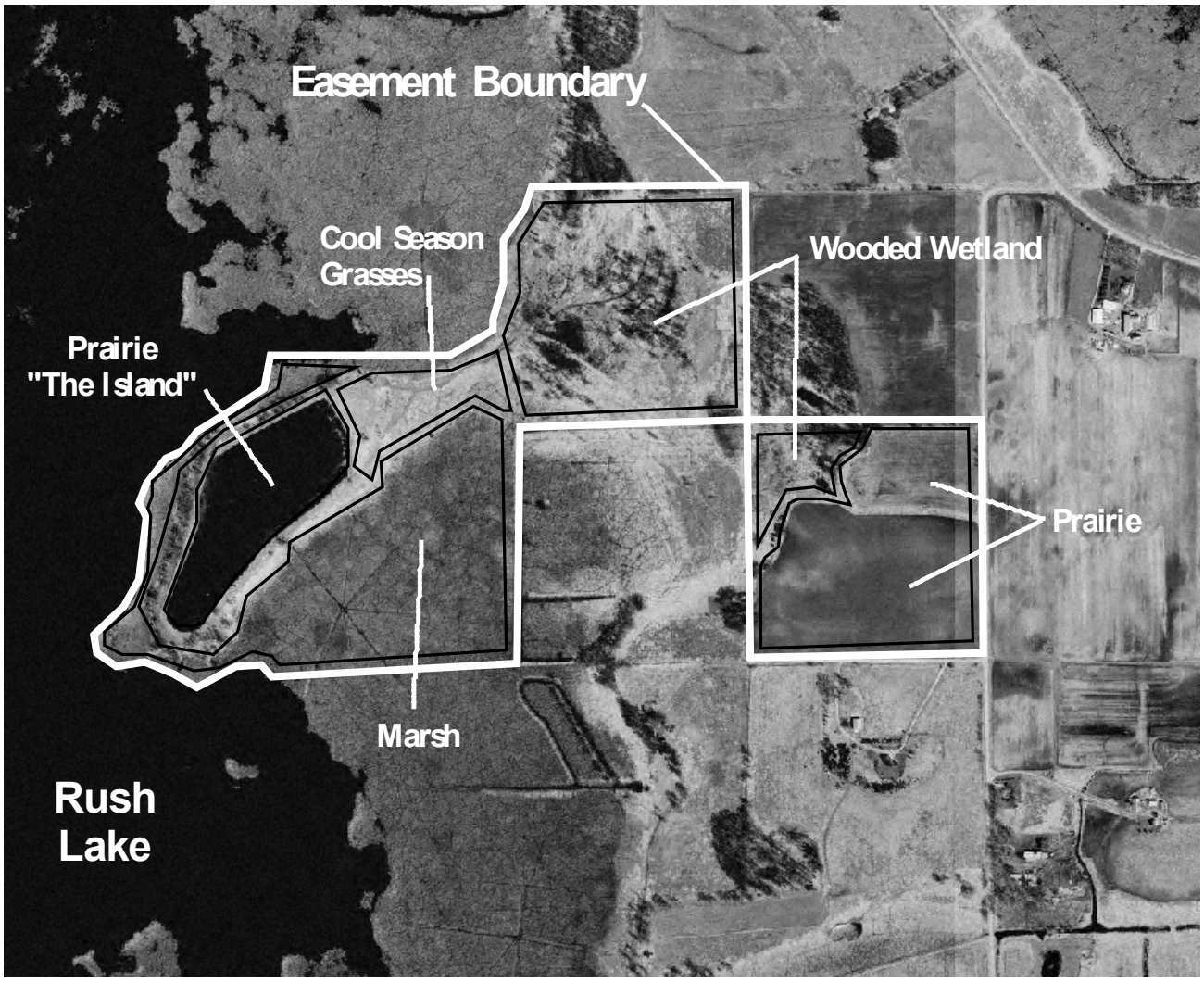
The male is recognized by body feathering in several variations of brown, iridescent colors of blue, purple and green on most of the head, although there is some unfeathered red skin around the eye and on the face (called wattles). The female has a brown mottled feathering that is much drabber, but offers great camouflage during the nesting season. Both have long pointed tails, although the males are longer with black barring.

Listen for signs of their breeding season as the male pheasant, also known as a rooster or cock becomes quite vocal and can be heard crowing to attract the female or hen. In early May, when it is time for the hen to begin laying her 10-12 olive-brown eggs, she will build a nest on the ground, concealing it within the grasses. She will incubate the eggs for 23-25 days. After hatch, the female cares for the brood up to 12 weeks.

Are you interested in pursuing the ring-necked pheasant for wildlife viewing or hunting? Then visit our GHRA website at http:\\www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/land/wildlife/hunt/hra.htm or call 920-387-7860 to receive our parcel listing of public lands.

GHRA Featured Property

The Curtis "Island"



Landowner: George Curtis

Location: Nepeuskun Township, Winnebago County

Size: 156 acres

George entered this land into the GHRA program in 1998. The property is an irregularly shaped tract located on the east shore of Rush Lake. Of the 156 acres, approximately 65 are upland and the rest is marsh or wooded wetland. The uplands have all been planted to native prairie grasses and wildflowers while the marsh and wooded areas consist mostly of canary grass, sedges, cattails, oaks, hickories, and ash trees. The island was a historical camping site for native Americans. Interestingly, in the fall of 1999 a wildfire burned much of the easement. Waterfowl nesting surveys conducted by the WDNR have shown very high densities of duck nests on the island area. Recent evidence also suggests that a heron rookery may be forming in the oak ridges along Rush Lake. This property is a wildlife mecca and a valuable asset to the GHRA program.

Rush Lake Planning on Track

By Tim Lizotte

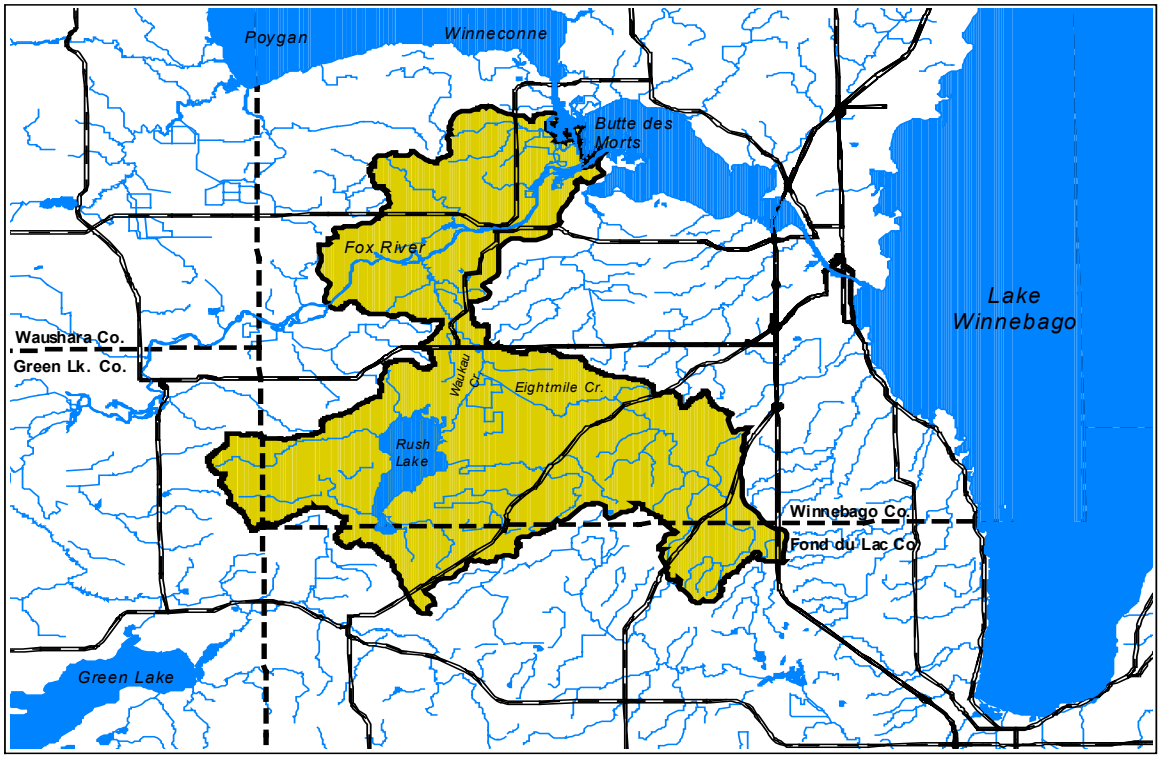
WDNR Biologist, Oshkosh

A steering committee of WNDR, County, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and Township representatives has begun meeting to work on development of a management plan for the Rush Lake Basin. Rush Lake is a 3,070-acre prairie pothole located in southern Winnebago County and northern Fond du Lac County. Wisconsin's Lake Inventory describes Rush Lake as a "... large marshy basin lying between two low hills in western Winnebago County. The water is clear, hard, and highly productive. Water is supplied through seepage, drainage, and spring flow. Rush Lake, being a shallow highly productive lake, is an excellent wildlife area. Aquatic vegetation is abundant with rushes and chara being the most common species." The average depth of Rush Lake is approximately 1.5 feet.

Being a prairie pothole, Rush Lake was once covered with dense mats of bulrush and other aquatic vegetation as a result of fluctuating water levels and periodic droughts. Due to it's productive water and extensive vegetation, Rush Lake has always been a magnet for aquatic birds and wildlife, including waterfowl, grebes, herons, terns, and eagles. Humans have also been attracted to the lake for it's productive natural communities, and there are numerous accounts of extensive Native American communities that once dotted the shorelines. White man has also found the lake productive and there is a rich tradition of duck hunting amongst the cattails and rushes. So much hunting in fact, that there is a serious lead contamination problem from all the shot that has been expended into the waters.

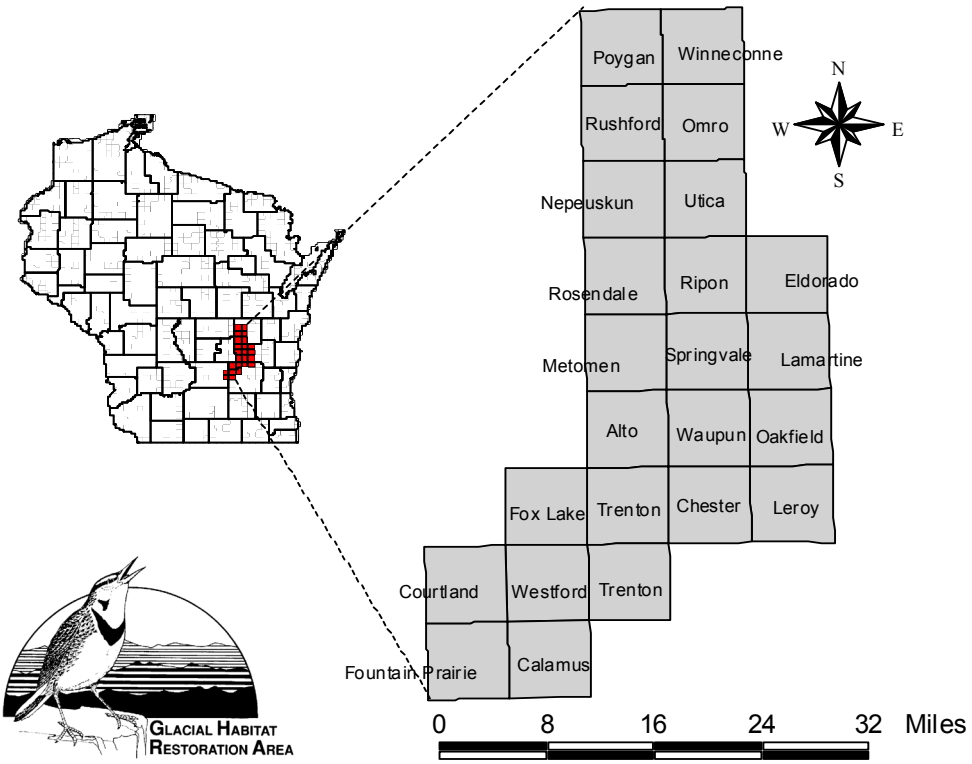
The past 70 years have witnessed a dramatic decline in the lake's aquatic vegetation, most noticeably the bulrush beds. Concurrently, the wildlife that utilizes this vegetation has also declined. A small dam at the outlet of the lake on Waukua Creek has created stable water levels that have contributed to the long-term vegetation decline. Additionally, Rush Lake faces problems caused by non-native carp, nutrient runoff, and lead contamination in the food chain.

Wide spread interest in reversing the biological decline of Rush Lake prompted the steering committee formation. A consultant will guide a public involvement process to gain input on the important decisions facing the long-term management of the lake. The final result will be a management plan that prescribes steps for the restoration of Rush Lake. For more information please contact Tim Lizotte @ 920-424-7886.❖



Rush Lake Watershed

Glacial Habitat Restoration Area and Staff



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